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ABSTRACT

Research by Darkenwald and by James and Day supports the contention that instructor behavior is a critical factor in shaping the kind of classroom environment desired by adult learners. Darkenwald developed the Actual and Ideal Adult Classroom Environmental Scale (ACES), which measures seven dimensions: involvement, affiliation, teacher support, task orientation, personal goal attainment, organization and clarity, and student influence. Discrepancies between instructor and student responses for the Actual ACES suggest that teachers are unaware of the social environment students actually experience. Research conducted by James and Day identified six categories of instructor behavior that contribute to making an adult learning environment less than optimal: attitude, attitude/behavior, behavior, behavior/task, environment, and task. They used McClusky's theory that margin is the relationship between the demands made upon an individual and resources used to cope with demands. Instructors can create optimal conditions for learning in the adult classroom by being aware of their role in creating the climate, changing their behavior or attitude, understanding learner concerns beyond the classroom, and involving adult students in establishing the climate. (NLA)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

# PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF

by Susan Imel
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## Adult Classroom Environment: The Role of the Instructor

Ever since Malcolm Knowles introduced the concept of "climate," adult educators have been talking about how to provide an appropriate environment for adult learning. Because it is widely believed that teaching adults is different from teaching children and adolescents, many prescriptions exist for structuring the adult learning environment to take into account these differences. Until recently, however, there has been little research to confirm or refute these suggestions. This **Practice Application Brief** examines some recent research that sheds light on the kind of classroom environment desired by adults and describes implications for practice emerging from the research. Because instructor behavior is a critical factor in shaping classroom climate (Knowles 1980), the focus is on the instructor's role in establishing an appropriate adult learning environment.

### What Does the Research Say?

Research conducted by Darkenwald and by James and Day provides information about the effect of the instructor on classroom environment. Darkenwald's research is concerned with measuring the social environment of the adult classroom, whereas James and Day focus on how instructor characteristics contribute to demands felt by students. Although unrelated, these research studies both support the contention that the instructor's role is critical in establishing an adult classroom environment.

### Assessing Adult Classroom Environment

In order to assess classroom social environment, Darkenwald (1987, 1989) and his doctoral students developed the Adult Classroom Environment Scale (ACES). Based on Moos's Classroom Environment Scale, the ACES envisions the adult learning environment as a system that includes the following elements: teacher behavior, teacher-student interaction, and student-student interaction. The ACES measures seven empirically based dimensions (Darkenwald 1989, p. 72):

**Involvement**. Extent to which students are satisfied with class and participate actively and attentively in activities (e.g., most students take part in class discussions).

**Affiliation.** Extent to which students like and interact positively with each other (e.g., students in class work well together).

**Teacher Support**. Extent of help, encouragement, concern, and friendship that teacher directs toward students (e.g., teacher encourages students to do their best).

**Task Orientation**. Extent to which students and teacher maintain focus on task and value achievement (e.g., teacher seldom talks about things not related to the course).

**Personal Goal Attainment**. Extent to which teacher is flexible, providing opportunities for students to pursue their individual interests (e.g., teacher tries to find out what individual students want to learn).

**Organization and Clarity**. Extent to which class activities are clear and well organized (e.g., teacher comes to class prepared).

**Student Influence**. Extent to which teacher is learner-centered and allows students to participate in course planning decisions (e.g., teacher rarely dominates classroom discussion).

Twenty-two of the ACES's 49 items relate directly to teacher behavior. Although the Involvement and Affiliation subscales contain no items that refer to teacher behavior, all seven items in both the Teacher Support and Organization and Clarity subscales do.

Two forms of the ACES were developed. One, the Actual, is designed to measure the actual or "real" environment; the second, the Ideal, asks about preferred or "ideal" environment. Using the two forms of the scale, data were collected from adults in credit classes in a community college, an evening M.B.A. program, and a large adult school. According to the results, "what students want most is a learning environment characterized by involvement, teacher support, task orientation, and organization and clarity" (ibid., p. 72). What they perceive they get, however, is something different: "a social climate deficient in all these attributes" (ibid.).

Instructors also completed the Actual ACES and when compared with student ratings, data revealed discrepancies between students' and teachers' ratings of the actual classroom social environment. Teachers tended to rate it "more positive or growth-enhancing than do students" (ibid., p. 73) and "to exaggerate the extent of student involvement and their own supportive behavior" (Darkenwald 1987). These results led Darkenwald to conclude that teachers are unaware of the type of social environment students actually experience.

To determine what teachers would do about this discrepancy if they were made aware of it, Sullivan (cited in Darkenwald 1989) conducted a study that provided feedback to teachers on the results of the ACES that had been administered in their classrooms. Despite information about the discrepancies, the teachers did nothing to close the gap for two reasons: (1) many were teaching the subject for the first time and were too busy staying on top of the course and (2) they were not specifically requested to make use of the feedback.

### Instructor-Generated Load

Research conducted by James (1985) and Day and James (1985), based on McClusky's concept of margin, identified categories of instructor behavior that contribute to making an adult learning environment less than optimal. According to McClusky's theory, margin is the equivalent of the relationship between demands (load) made upon an individual by self and society and the resources (power) he or she can bring to bear upon that load: Margin = Power/Load. The researchers investigated how instructors of adults increase student load thereby "contributing to the depletion of discretionary energy (margin)" (Day and James 1985, p. 40).

Information about the demands (load) instructors placed upon adult students was collected through questionnaires administered to workshop participants and semistructured interviews. A total of 54 individuals provided 157 personal examples (responses) of instructor-generated load. The responses were sorted into the following categories (adapted from James 1985, p. 12). (The number in parenthesis following the description

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indicates the percentage of responses assigned to the category.)

**Attitude.** Instructor predisposition to respond positively or negatively to certain situations, concepts, or persons (e.g., teacher expressing a lack of confidence in students as learners). (10.19%)

**Attitude/Behavior.** Instructor behavior or demeanor that seems to express an attitude to the learner (e.g., teacher treating learners as inferior). (28.03%)

**Behavior.** Instructor's overt physical actions or demeanor (e.g., teacher waiting for an answer that just won't come). (33.76%)

**Behavior/Task.** Instructor behavior or demeanor that adds to the academic burden with no apparent benefit (e.g., teacher is unprepared in subject matter). (16.56%)

**Environment.** Physical conditions and surroundings in which the learning endeavor takes place (e.g., room too hot). (8.92%)

**Task.** An academically oriented burden required by the instructor (e.g., no explanation of what is expected). (2.54%)

Nearly 80% (77.9%) of the responses related in some way to the instructor's behavior, which according to James (ibid., p. 10) "tends to confirm Knowles' contention that instructor behavior plays the most significant part in establishing a learning climate." On the other hand, both the Task and the Environment categories seem to be insignificant in adult learners' perceptions of instructor-generated load, perhaps because adult learners expect academic requirements to be associated with courses and they accept the environmental aspects of a learning situation that are not under the control of the instructor (ibid.).

### What Are the Practice Implications?

Given the critical nature of their role, how can instructors create optimal conditions for learning in the adult classroom? Both instructors and administrators/program planners can be involved in the effort to establish an effective instructional environment for adult learners.

Instructors can accomplish this by--

- **Becoming aware of the importance of their role in creating an effective adult classroom environment.** This knowledge may need to come from an outside source such as inservice programs that provide information about students' preferred learning environments and the frequent discrepancies between students' and instructors' perceptions of the environment (Darkenwald 1989).

- **Acknowledging that there may be many ways that they can create a more favorable learning environment by changing their behavior or attitude.** By carefully analyzing their classroom behaviors and attitudes, instructors may detect patterns or habits that they can change to improve the environment. For example, do they respect students as individuals and care about whether they learn (Darkenwald 1989)? Also, are they critical of suggestions or points of view expressed by learners (Day 1985)?

- **Understanding that concerns of learners do not just center around the content of the course.** For example, do they take into consideration other life roles and responsibilities that are characteristic of most adult students or do they convey the attitude that their class is the only thing participants do in life (Day 1985)?

- **Enlisting the help and support of the adult students in establishing an environment that is conducive to learning.** Although it is the responsibility of instructors to initiate a suitable environment, they should seek ways to involve adult students in enhancing the overall quality of the classroom climate (Darkenwald 1989). At the initial class meeting, the instructor can discuss with the students their mutual responsibility for establishing such an environment.

Administrators and program planners working with instructors can accomplish this by--

- **Offering inservice programs that create awareness of the role of the instructor in developing optimum learning environments.** These programs can introduce instructors to the concept of Margin and to the type of learning environment preferred by adults.

- **Enabling instructors to administer the ACES in their classrooms and motivating them to use the results to improve teaching-learning transactions.** If administrators stress the importance of establishing optimal learning environments and expect instructors to use the results of the ACES to narrow discrepancies between the actual and preferred learning environments, they are more likely to do so.

- **Observing instructional settings to note how instructors carry out their role in establishing the learning environment.** Such monitoring could be conducted as a part of an ongoing program of staff development and should result in constructive feedback.

- **Recruiting and hiring instructors who respect adults as learners and understand the importance of their involvement in creating an optimal learning environment.** The attitude instructors display toward their students has a significant role in creating an appropriate climate. It is much easier to develop a optimal learning environment by beginning with instructors who display a positive attitude toward adult learners.

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